

## INTRODUCTIONARY ARTICLE

# THE GREAT DEPRESSION. INFORMAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN A USURPATORY DEMOCRACY

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## ABSTRACT

Many countries have had people in power who were mower-mad and hungry for money as their representatives. In the case of Poland, there is quiet acquiescence to unethical actions by the authorities for the sake of one's own benefits, and a commonly accepted aversion to politicians (Zalec, 2022). of all kinds, which may be linked to the country's history. Those in power have become usurpers who do not care about the rules, the constitution or EU law, nor are they afraid of any punishment. Those who oppose these precedents become enemies, murderers or are accused of spreading propaganda. The country is divided into two camps - those who support the current government and those who are against it. The consequences do not only affect individuals, they are sometimes extended to entire municipalities where the current ruling party has lost the election. Ignorance or lack of civic knowledge can cause some voters to ignore the fact/not realise that their passivity is nevertheless supporting the current government. Crucial to combating this phenomenon is reliable informal citizenship education, carried out in an ongoing, emotionally charged way, appealing to the positive sides of informed citizenship and not discouraging to politics. The value of democracy should be taught. People should become open to discussing democracy, and the media should also repeat such positive messages. It is also important to remember what has happened by now.

**Keywords:** informal education, citizenship education, democracy, usurpation, politics



## INTRODUCTION

Usurpatory democracy is about gaining power through democratic elections and keeping up appearances of functioning democratic institutions while seeking to subjugate them in such a way that the ruling system can never lose an election again. The term “hybrid regimes” (Diamond, 1996; Prokop, 2015) does not capture the essence of the matter, as in this case, it is not only the current rate of democracy that is important but the direction of change - the departure from democracy for authoritarianism. Relevant to the analysis of the situation of citizenship education is the betrayal of the political elite and the appropriation of institutions and goods that were supposed to serve citizens and for which citizens have hitherto felt responsible.

To a certain extent, usurper democracy can also be identified with the concept of treason of the intellectuals (Benda, 1928) in terms of the *modus operandi*, but the motives, goals and values may be questionable. In the case of usurper democracy, we have a brush with pusillanimous questioning of the moral legitimacy of past elites and a striving for the decomposition of the existing social structure. However, slogans of moral renewal through a return to traditional values are intended as a façade that will hide the true intentions and meaning of the action-concentration of resources. Superficiality and simulacrums become symbols of usurper democracy - not only ideology, but also community, justice, democracy, law are superficial.

Examples of such democracies are the governments of Victor Orban in Hungary and the party of Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland. The concept of usurpatory democracy also includes the actions of politicians reaching the highest positions and breaking the rules of democracy as much as their environment allows them, e.g., Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. In this article we will analyse the situation of informal citizenship education in Poland, as here we function as participant observers, immersed in the reality under study.

## CHANGE OF LANGUAGE

A fundamental feature of usurper democracy is a change of language, behind which is a different view of the world from the previous one and a radically different understanding of concepts. Anyway, in the context of the other features analysed, it is difficult to say unequivocally whether we are dealing here with a different understanding of concepts, ideological saturation or cynicism and hypocrisy. In the case of Trump, it can be assumed that he lives “in his own world” and believes his own lies. In the case of Johnson and Orban, we are rather dealing with cynical political players who know very well that they are lying and when they are lying. In the ruling camp coordinated by Kaczyński’s party, it seems that while in power, successive ideological Red Guards left the party and by the end of the second term only cynics were left.

Language becomes a weapon. It is meant to strongly polarise society, to present some as missionaries and guardians of values, and to severely hurt outsiders. The category of “outsider” includes anyone who does not support the actions of the ruling party (Ahmad et al. 2022).

In such an atmosphere, there is no place for discussion, as conversations turn into rows, replete with invectives and hate speech. Facts are irrelevant because they are subject to constant interpretation in favour of the representatives in power. In such a situation, any deliberation and fact-finding is impossible, as communication is reduced to the presentation and justification of the party message.

Language cannot perform a communicative function because it is a tool for imposing a narrative accepted by the representatives of power (Gagarina et al., 2022). And they are not interested in the opinion of others, only in imposing their own vision of the world for the rest to accept. Power communicates its will in an unsophisticated way. It is not only impossible to have a deep understanding in the Buberian sense (Buber, 1999), but any other.

### IDEOLOGICAL OFFENSIVE

Power attracts with promises and values. Effectiveness in delivering on promises generally ensures the continuation of power. Ideology can attract the undecided and at the same time mask ineptitude and a hidden agenda. In Poland, populists have appealed to the myth of the peaceful countryside, traditional values, the family, the church. Social programmes, described by opponents as ‘giving money away’, have been supported by fuelling fear of outsiders.

Dislike of politics and politicians has undergone a bizarre evolution. A widespread belief has been perpetuated that, like all other politicians, these too steal, but at least they share. Rather, such diagnoses indicate a deep demoralisation and acceptance of unethical actions for the sake of self-interest. Psychology, sociology and especially game theory explain quite accurately the mechanisms involved in such electoral decisions (like sour grapes, *schadenfreude* or altruistic punishment). Typical Polish resentment towards authority, perpetuated by partition, occupation and communism (Lasinska, 2013) has been given fodder in the form of official hatred directed towards everyone else: emigrants, non-heteronormative people, Germans, the European Union. The logic of division is based on simple associations, because it is supposed to reach simple or confused people. The division between us (good)-them (evil) becomes clear, strictly defined. It is then very easy to place various others on the side of evil: neighbour

- women who assert their rights become murderers of unborn children;
- independent judges and independent lawyers are labelled a privileged caste, defending privileges;
- teachers, doctors, farmers, who insist on decent wages, become, in the eyes of the authorities, almost bandits, intent on robbing the state;

- independent journalists are accused of lies and manipulation, because the picture they present does not agree with the “only right” (as in the communist times) vision of reality according to the authorities.

The ideological offensive is based on an appeal to a specifically understood archetype of the patriot and the Catholic. A true patriot in this view is one who places national values above everything else (nationalist) - a true Catholic is one who follows the teachings of the Catholic Church. The practice of the authorities shows that the Catholic Church and the nationalist circles are the greatest beneficiaries of usurper democracy in Poland (apart from the representatives of the authorities themselves, of course).

In the long term, the consequences of such actions in the moral space must be reckoned with. Symbolic violence is not able to break those convinced of one's values, but it perpetuates a lack of trust in the authority of the general public. How then can citizens demonstrate citizenship and work for the common good if their value system is 'iniquitous'. Subsequent actions by the authorities have shown that anyone can be disloyal - even university professors conduct scientific activities that do not fit in with the expectations of the authorities.

## APPROPRIATIONS

Usurpation is about appropriation and impunity. Democracy and the rule of law can be said to morph gradually as parties take over more institutions. They seek to subjugate everything under the guise of improvement. In reality, however, it is all about control and domination.

In order to be able to act with impunity, everything must be reduced to a one-man (party or party boss) government. If this is successful, democratic rules must be used to change the law so that the right (=our) people are placed in the most important offices. In Hungary, Orbán's party got such a majority in the elections that it was able to change the constitution, so that legal changes and the appropriation of institutions in the majesty of the law could go more smoothly. In Poland, Kaczynski's party did not have such a majority, so out of necessity other methods were brazenly used:

- ignoring inconvenient legislation and legal opinions;
- limiting opportunities for public consultation;
- interpreting legal norms as they whim.

And finally:

- breaking the constitution, and;
- disobeying court judgements.

As a result, we have witnessed and are witnessing in Poland a departure from the rules of the game applicable in a democratic state. Representa-

tives of the authorities ostentatiously and arrogantly began to change the constitutional foundations by the method of accomplished facts. Examples of such actions are the activities of the National Council of the Judiciary or the Constitutional Tribunal, whose members were appointed in breach of the Constitution, without any respect for the law. Decisions issued by these authorities entered and are still entering the legal order and are enforced by other organs of the state, available to the authorities, although not acknowledged by independent institutions. When international institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) or the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) question the legal status of such creations, this is met with ostentatious ignorance or mockery. The party in power in Poland is not afraid of verdicts and penalties adjudged by international tribunals or the withholding of EU funds. To the average, yet politically-informed voter, this looks like sacrificing the good of the country for the sake of staying in power. This is all the more bizarre as it blatantly contradicts the romantic educational ideals traditionally instilled in Poles - the sacrifice of personal well-being for the country's good.

The appropriation of public institutions that are supposed to serve the public, violating the principle of power-sharing, is only one dimension of the appropriation of reality. A second equally important dimension is the attempt to control the media and restrict the right to information. Independent media give citizens the chance to get a more adequate picture of reality. In Hungary, this process is practically over. In Poland, the party has taken over the public media, which have become the propaganda tube of the ruling party - praising party achievements and denigrating the opposition. Local media have also been taken over. Attempts to seize or suppress private media are still ongoing, but they are mostly unsuccessful due to links with foreign capital and resistance from the owners. The most brutal attempts to take over or liquidate Poland's largest private television station have been met with intervention from the US government, which has given a clear signal that it will not tolerate such actions.

A third dimension of appropriation is the waste of public funds and the enfranchisement of public assets of individuals and institutions associated with the party. The independent media regularly report on numerous irregularities in the management of public finances consisting of:

- liquidation of competitions, or "rigging" of competitions - competitions are won by people linked to the ruling party or special foundations set up by party people;
- the diversion of funds from state-owned companies - people in high positions pay set amounts of money to the party or to the campaigns of chosen members of the ruling party;
- nepotism - staffing the boards of state-owned companies with relatives and colleagues without any qualifications, with record holders drawing salaries for their participation in the boards of several companies at the same time;

- ignoring the judgments of the CJEU and the ECHR, resulting in multi-million dollar fines.

As a result, the number of millionaires linked to the ruling party is growing and the state is experiencing increasing economic problems in the form of inflation, falling purchasing power of money and debt. The party generously rewards its acolytes for their loyalty without regard to the consequences for the state. Impunity is fostered by the subordination of the prosecutor's office, which takes no actions against people in power.

## A MONOPOLY ON POWER

The usurper power does not tolerate competition, hence it seeks to control all dimensions of social life. And so, one by one, we are faced with an attempt to subjugate the following areas by various means:

- local government authority. The way to limit the influence of local governments is to limit government grants. Some of the money from the central budget is allocated according to the principle that municipalities where the ruling party has won get more or additional funding. As a result, municipalities not favourable to the government are underinvested.
- the third power - the judiciary - the mass exchange of Presidents of Courts by fax by the Minister of Justice. Here, the authority has failed in part, as numerous "unruly" judges continue to pass judgements in accordance with their conscience and the spirit of the law, which results in suspensions and disbarment cases for them.
- the fourth power - the media.
- schooling. Schools became a place for ideological offensives and attempts to groom a new citizen: Pole-Catholic. Anything that did not conform to the specifically conceived coarse and harsh tradition was seen as hostile. Symptomatic was the publication of a textbook on civics for secondary schools, in which a prominent Polish professor selected facts to suit the ruling party's anti-European ideology (Roszkowski, 2022).
- science. The Ministry awards grants to universities for practising science primarily on the basis of an assessment of scientific output. This in turn is assessed on the basis of a list of scientific journals, the value of which is set by the ministry. The last years of usurper democracy have seen constant manipulation, with the Minister adding points to those journals that are ideologically in line with the values of the Catholic tradition.

The result is a picture of a party of power that is unlimited in its appetite for power and money and the constant ideological offensive directed against the Other concretises the division into two warring camps.

## WHAT DOES THIS SITUATION TEACH CITIZENS?

It is necessary to start from the last thesis - two fighting camps: supporters of usurper power and the average, educated citizen, versed in modernity, not ideologically defined. Democracy needs both types of citizens - usurper democracy only acolytes.

It is also important to realise that, with a clear division and balance of power, it will be increasingly difficult for supporters of democracy to win elections, as they are 'tied down' by the rules of the game, while power-hungry usurpers will stop at nothing to gain and hold on to power, and lies and manipulation are very delicate means of influence. From the actions of the usurpers, we can conclude that they can change the law against the constitution, change the rules of the electoral game, rig elections, or not acknowledge the lost elections and not hand over power.

One should also take into account the passivity of a whole group of uninformed voters who have lost their civic vigilance (or perhaps never had it) and do not realise the consequences of their non-choices. They are the ones with their lack of civic knowledge who become the biggest threat and at the same time an example of how underdevelopment/educational deficiency leads to the regression not only of the individual but of the whole community. In the case of insufficient development of civic awareness, we all pay with the loss of development opportunities and the risk of collapse. As is well known, inaction is also a type of action, with specific consequences. In this case, passivity towards an usurper can be compared to passivity towards an active thug. The passive voter sides with the criminals destroying others' ability to choose. For them, however, there is an opportunity for citizenship education all the time. We just need to find a way to reach them effectively and systemically to build the civic awareness they do not have now.

In order to determine the educational situation of conscious citizens, it is still necessary, in order to complete the picture of the whole, to take into account the choices of the acolytes of the usurper system. There is certainly among them a large group of beneficiaries of the usurper system - relatives and colleagues, representatives of the usurper party, who benefit from the usurpation in a direct way - either materially or by gaining other profits - power, prestige, the ability to decide the fate of others, fame. It is the same mechanism that works in all systems. People who are not competent, who would have no chance of a career under normal conditions, or who suffer from an obvious lack of something, become faithful servants of the new deal. One can only be surprised that they do not realise what they will leave behind for others - a devastated moral order, a stained name. Perhaps they will become a symbol of national betrayal, cynicism and stupidity? It may be even more surprising that in this group we also find a small number of university professors who should be more aware of what they are doing. Of course, there are psychological mechanisms that explain this - as in the case

of professors serving criminal ideologies in the past (some of which were mentioned earlier) but this is a topic for a separate analysis.

Acolytes generally form an elite, a narrow group of people who acquire goods at the expense of the rest of society, so they cannot constitute a dominant majority even among the supporters themselves. These remaining people are most likely to be those reluctant to change, valuing tradition, peace and order. They do not realise that one cannot exist without the other (Kurczewska & Szacki, 1984). The supporters of the usurper democracies we have discussed hope that an integrationist party (March & Olsen, 1984) will provide them with the peace and security they have enjoyed so far. Unfortunately, these people are ideologically saturated such that they will defend the status quo and will not be persuaded to change their worldview because it is the reason for their support of usurper populists. They will believe the lies as long as peace is not disturbed-as long as they can afford to meet their basic needs. They will persist in their Macondo, unable or unwilling to see what awaits beyond the horizon. They are unable or unwilling to see the widening gap between them and the real beneficiaries of the system - people in power turning themselves into fat cats at the expense of the quality of public services. Some of them will become so ideologically inflamed that even on internet forums and in conversations with friends, they will breathe fire and brimstone and dish the dirt on anyone who thinks differently. In turn, anger, hatred and resentment lead to the search for a scapegoat and create room for further manipulation.

Cynical players will not need re-education because they are aware of the evil being done. They consciously enjoy the benefits, knowing the cost that others must bear. Unconscious supporters are unlikely to possess the ability to recognise the nature of the situation until it destabilises and a sharp, acutely felt decline in quality of life occurs. That is, when the economic situation of society makes it impossible to meet basic needs. Even then (given the low quality of social capital in the form of trust [Sztompka, 2016]) such people will constitute difficult material for future citizenship education.

The third group of citizens primarily concerned by this article are informed citizens. Observation of the mechanisms of usurpation of the democratic system leads to a new great depression, this time in a strictly psychological dimension (Pacewicz, 2017). In extreme form, we have seen cases of self-immolation. On a daily basis, many citizens who are aware of what is happening live with a sense of political depression, because there is no possibility of a return to normality, understood as living in a country of many harmoniously coexisting values. Conscious citizens see and understand the whole process of progressive enslavement and a return to an imposed narrative. The conclusions from the observation of political reality are very pessimistic. The only way to stop the destruction of the state and social capital is a change of government. This, however, seems less and less possible with each successive election - precisely because of usurpation. Convincing the undecided in a clash with the propaganda machine seems



to verge on some kind of cottage industry method of reversing the trend (especially bearing in mind that we are all subject to the constraints of being locked into information bubbles - that is, we will reach those with similar beliefs).

The question remains open: what can be done? Media images of destruction and stripping people of their ability to influence reality constitute negative citizenship education - they show how bad things already are but are unable to define ways out.

At every stage, we need a programmatically extensive citizenship education of a positive nature. Educators know well that the right action is possible when knowledge is internalised - combined with emotions. This is how attitudes are formed. What we need, therefore, is a solid knowledge of the value of democracy, supported by the right emotions (Pavlikova, 2017). This needs to be done all the time, especially in informal education - through the media, personal example, open debate (Králík & Máhrík, 2019; Králík & Török, 2016). In addition, to have hope. And then hold all irregularities to account, because without the resistance of the righteous and an accounting of wrongs, there will be no way to alleviate depression or frustration (Roubalová et al., 2021). This is a great warning to those who come after the usurpers. The depressed anger of their voters could easily turn against the new authorities.

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